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ABSTRACT

This interview with Mexican-American, Octavio Solis, considers that many facets of his education and experience in the theater. Solis, interviewed by Bob Yowell, Northern Arizona University Theatre Department faculty member and that campus' producer of Solis' play "El Paso Blue," touches on the importance of his acting experience when writing plays. Crediting his own teachers, he lauds educational theater (his play was winner of the American College Theatre Festival), gives valuable advice on character approaches for both actor and author, and discusses the influence of multiculturalism in those interpretations. (CR)

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This interview was conducted on November 3, 1994 on the campus of Northern Arizona University. As part of the Department of Theatre's minority new play festival, the Theatre Department at Northern Arizona University was producing Octavio Solis's new play, El Paso Blue when this interview was conducted. Northern Arizona University entered their production of El Paso Blue into the American College Theatre Festival. Their production was choosen as a national winner from over nine hundred entrants and they were invited to performe El Paso Blue at the Kennedy Center on April 19 and 20, 1995. Faculty member, Bob Yowell, directed the production.

OCTAVIO SOLIS is a transplanted Texan currently residing in San Francisco. After receiving a Master of Fine Art's degree from Trinity University in San Antonio, he spent ten years in Dallas working at the Dallas Theatre Center, the Arts Magnet High School, and the University of Texas at Dallas. Mr. Solis has studied under Paul Baker, John O'Keefe and Maria Irene Fornes. His plays, Man of the Flesh and Prospect, have been produced at El Teatro Campesino, South Coast Repertory, The Magic Theatre, The Latino Chicago Theatre Company, and Teatro Dallas. Burning Dreams, an original opera with Gina Leishman and Julie Hebert, was produced at the San Diego Repertory Theatre in 1994. San Francisco's Thick Description produced a workshop of Santos & Santos in 1993, and the Dallas Theatre Center will produce the world premiere of the play in the spring of 1995. Intersection for the Arts produced a workshop of El Paso Blue in San Francisco in 1994. Scrappers, a play for young people, toured area high schools for South Coast Repertory's fall tour in 1992 and 1993. Octavio Solis is currently working on The Aeneid Project for South Coast Repertory. Octavio has received the Glickman Award from the Bay Area Critics for Best New Play (1993), for the workshop production of Santos & Santos, the Barrie and B.C. Stavis Playwriting Award from the National Theatre conference (1992), grants from the Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Fund, and the Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation. Octavio has received commissions for new works from South Coast Repertory Theatre, the Eureka Theatre Company, and the San Diego Repertory Theatre.

Bob Yowell, Coordinator of Theatre at Northern Arizona University, talks with OCTAVIO SOLIS, playwright.

Yowell: Well, Octavio we already know a little about you. You are a Mexican American playwright and a native of El Paso, Texas. You went to high school in El Paso. Then you did your undergraduate degree at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Is it there that you first became affiliated with Paul Baker? Was this a catalyst for you?

Solis: Yes, it was very exciting for me, because it blew open ways in which one could find character, or ways in which one could write a play, or one could approach a work of art, any work of art. It also made me think of ways to develop character as an actor, or ways in which to put a play together, such as the one I am writing.

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It made me think of it (writing plays) in more that basic theatrical terms, by allowing me to bring in all artistic fields into the discussion. It made me feel like I could be like Cezanne or Stravinsky when I was creating a character. The same process that a musician uses or a visual artist, can be the same process that an actor uses when creating a character.

Yowell: So, you started as an actor.

Solis: Yes, I started as an actor. I always felt that's what I was going to do. In high school, I did a lot of acting. I wrote too, but never connected the two. I wrote for literary magazines, wrote poetry, short stories, and that sort of thing. In college, I never really seriously pursued writing. I thought that I was going to be an actor.

Yowell: And you feel being an actor is an asset to your playwriting?

Solis: Oh, definitely, there's a dynamic that cannot be ignored when you're writing for the stage. You are writing things that have to be spoken by actors; they have to be justified by a person on stage. The way characters speak in a novel, a short story or a piece of fiction is very different from the way things are done on stage. The difference can be very subtle or grand. It can be obvious, but it is different. On the stage everything is distilled, purified and condensed. We see only the most essential things. You can put almost anything you want in a novel. The writer can add more, and take time, because the reader has as much time as he wants to devote to the novel. The reader can take three or four months reading the novel. The world of the play must take place within a two or three hour time span. So in the play, you must write in a very poignant, very distilled way.

Yowell: Yes, then you went on to the Dallas Theatre Center.

Solis: Yes, it was still Trinity University. TU's graduate theatre program was housed at the Dallas Theatre Center, so it was a graduate school centered several hundred miles away from the main campus in San Antonio. It was definitely the theatre environment that I wanted. I didn't want to hit the streets and start looking for acting jobs right out of my undergraduate degree. I felt that I needed more of a protected environment and still work with a professional group of actors. I was able to take my classes from nine to one, take a lunch break, and then work on theatre crews from one to five in the afternoons, and then work on shows from seven to eleven in the evenings. They made us work long hours and work seven days a week.

Yowell: Who did you work with when you were there?

Solis: There were a variety of individuals who were my teachers. I eventually became an instructor there in my third year. I have kept up with very few of the people and it's now disbanded. Trinity University decided that they did not want a graduate program in Dallas and, I believe, that the board at the Dallas Center was in agreement with that decision. The Dallas Center wanted to be a purely professional company. It really is unfortunate that they made this decision, because it was a wonderful experience, a great way to learn. Andrienne Hall took over the Dallas Theatre Center after I left.

Yowell: So, you starting to get some recognition as a playwright. We, (Northern Arizona University), are doing your play, El Paso Blue , as part of our Minority New Play Festival and the Dallas Theatre Center will also be doing your play, Santo & Santos. You have another play called Prospect.

Solis: Yes, I started working on that play, (Prospect), in 1988. I was working with a small theatre company in Dallas called the Theatre Garage. I mounted it there for pennies. We were a very poor theatre and eventually I submitted that script to the Hispanic Playwright Project reading series, hosted by the South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, California, and they did it as a reading. It got a lot of attention. People liked the play because its extremely controversial. Two companies picked it up and wanted to produce it. One was the Chicago Latino Theatre Company, which did a very fine job with it and eventually toured it to the Edinburgh Theatre Festival a year ago last September (1993).

Yowell: Did you go to Edinburgh?

Solis: No, I didn't get to go.

Solis: The other company was the Teatro Campesino.

Yowell: They did a nice job with it?

Solis: Initially, there was a director who worked with it, but at the last minute, he got an offer in New York that he could not resist. They were looking for a director, and after a while, they let me direct it. That was about a year ago, April 1993, and we toured that show to Berkeley, California.

Yowell: It went well?

Solis: It went very, very well.

Yowell: You mentioned Teatro Campesino. As we study the history of Latino Theatre in this country, a lot of roads seem to lead back to Luis Valdez. Can you comment on that?

Solis: Yes, Luis Valdez is definitely one of the pioneers in this country for a form of American theatre that has largely been ignored by the Anglo community and by the college training system. And yet, he has been internationally renowned. Valdez, his company, and his work has received a lot of attention from North American, Europe, and Japan. Peter Brook came and worked with Valdez. There were companies from Japan that came to work with him. He started a very exciting, original, and a very American form of theatre. He started simple, not that he wanted to start a new form of theatre, but because he had very little money. Sometimes all he had was a pick-up truck, some placards, and a few masks.

Yowell: It seems like Mr. Valdez was trying to communicate to a specific audience and he knew that Anglo theatre ways would not work. Is that a fair assumption?

Solis: No, not necessarily. The mission was very clear. He had to entertain the people who were on the picket lines. The migrant workers. . . he had to entertain them. And so Caesar Chavas saw him and said, " . . .you know a little about theatre, so why don't you entertain the troops". And it started as simply as that. He found that the thing that worked best was that which satirizes the bosses. He had to do his work with next to nothing. His first public stage was the back of a pick up truck. People had to put their own costumes together. It was a very declamatory, agit-prop style of theatre. It wasn't that they were playing to a different class of people. They were playing outdoors so they had to play big. A character who was playing a boss, wore a sign that said "boss," even if he was wearing jeans and a tee shirt. Put a sign on him, that says boss and he became a boss.

Yowell: Tell me about your work. Where do you think your coming from? Do you see your plays coming out of people who have come before you.

Solis: Uh, yes and no. Unfortunately, in my education both in high school and through college, there was nothing that exposed me to artist like Luis Valdez. I learned about Valdez and others when I went to California. I guess some of it was my fault, but it also says something about the educational system that teaches more about Ibsen, than about a real American theatre artist. It says something about the shortcomings of our educational system.

Yowell: But, you did get quite an education in European Literature, and Greek Mythology.

Solis: Oh yes, I had the full liberal arts education. I'm an encyclopedia of that, because I emersed myself in it and I loved it. For a time, I became an anglophile. So my discovery of my culture came late, when I realized that they were people like me that includes other writers, other artists, visual artists, and especially actors. If I had know that there were other Latino

actors around me, I would have written for them when I first started writing. But, I was in a theatre, well, I was the only Latino, and I didn't feel very Latino.

Yowell: And, I notice that this play that we are working on now, EL Paso Blue, it is an example of intertextuality. We have other stories within the play. This is a play about Mexican Americans, but there is Greek Mythology in the play that we are seeing. Is this true?

Solis: Well, not in a conscious sense. It wasn't something that I set out to do. It was something that I discovered after the fact. It was an audience member who said this is the story of Menelaus and Helen. And oh, I said, so it is.

Yowell: I see.

Solis: People who have seen the play say that this is a version of the story of Oedipus. But I can't say that I wrote El Paso Blue with the story of Oedipus in mind.

Yowell: Is this the muse of the artist at work?

Solis: Well, it's already in my bones. It's the way I perceive the world. It's part of the way I think, so I don't have to work at it. It happens on its own.

Yowell: So there are these universal themes, be they from Europe or Mexico, that you have tapped into?

Solis: I hope so.

Yowell: Yes, I think so.

Solis: What I have discovered is that the more specific I am, the more universal, I become.

Yowell: Yes.

Solis: If I try to be universal, I wind up generalizing, and generalizations are bland, and lifeless and not immediate. I'm looking for experiences that live, that are alive, that are truthful. It's a paradox, that in a craft where I have to be a liar, I have to tell the truth, and that is what I'm about.

Yowell: An artist is a liar who tells the truth.

Solis: I feel that very strongly. I make up these characters and this stuff never really happened, but there is truth there. I am always looking for the most honest way to express something, that can be artful, but if it isn't honest, it can't stand up.

Yowell: Talk about all the work that you doing. What are you trying to do? What is your message?

Solis: I don't know.

Yowell: I mean, Arthur Miller in Death of a Salesman, wrote about the common man. In that great story of Willie Loman, he wrote the story of a man who didn't know who he was, a man who made the wrong choices. There are also some very clean cut themes that run through Williams, O'Neill, and Shepard, to name just a few playwrights. What is Octavio Solis writing about?

Solis: I don't know. I feel like I want to resolve for myself what makes me American. At the same time, I feel like the world is too small to think just about being an American. The world is changing so much. It's shrinking. Those great words, "I am American", seem almost self defeating. But that's what I am trying to do. We live in a country that wants people to belong, and I'm struggling with that. I don't know exactly what my mission is.

Yowell: But, you're writing about Latinos in an American Society.

Solis: Yeah.

Yowell: Your writing about how Mexicans perceive the world, kind of a stranger in a strange land. I've gotten that wrong, but . .

Solis: Sorta. I feel like ultimately, I am in denial and I have been doing that all my life.

Yowell: I appreciate that.

Solis: I think that . . .

Yowell: Your message will change.

Solis: It will change. I feel that there are certain stories that I have to tell right now. It's very interesting that I didn't start writing about Texas until I moved to California. I wrote a lot of silly stories about not really who I am, but now that I am in California, Texas looms large for me, and I want to write about that. I'm interested in issues about my culture that deal with concepts of justice, concept of love, concept of honor.

Yowell: And these are Mexican concepts of . . .

Solis: No, these are universal. Everyone knows what honor is.

Yowell: But there's an Anglo version of honor.

Solis: Yeah, because there is a clash going on within me as to how I perceive certain things and how the Anglo community perceives--

and sometimes they click and sometimes they don't. It's like the Rodney King thing, the whole justice concept. Black Americans have a certain perception of justice as do white Americans and they don't match. In my play, Santos & Santos, I explore that. In Mexican culture, we have a perception of how justice is perceived and how it is administered and Americans have a different, a very different perception of justice.

Yowell: In terms of Multiculturism, let me ask you a question. I'm directing your play, but I'm obviously not a Latino. Do you feel OK about that?

Solis: Yeah, Yeah, I'm not a Nazi.

Yowell: Well you know, there are people who feel that only a Latino should direct a Latino play, and African Americans should only direct African American plays.

Solis: No, I don't necessarily feel that way. I'm cautious about it. I want to know who is doing the work. It comes down to not what race or color, but how good of a director is this person. I have had some unpleasant experiences with Anglo directors, who just did not get it. They could not get what I was trying to do with my plays. They directed the play like it was a museum piece. I recall one particular director who did not make any attempt to find out, to connect, and deal with the work, and the culture on its terms. He dealt with it only on his terms. In terms of the real world, the truth is that I want to get my work done so I must be open. I do feel a mandate. There are Latino directors out there who need the work, and they are good. Many Latino directors are not being considered for Ibsen or Shakespeare. They are only being considered for Latino work. Just like Asians are only being considered for Asian work, and Black directors for Black plays. There is the feeling that since a play deals with African American issues, it would be good for a Black to do that play. But with Latinos, there is a dearth of Latino plays being written, in comparison to works by whites, women, and even black authors.

Yowell: So you think that this mix is really healthy? I'm directing your play. I'm an Anglo, and I learn something about your world and you learn something about mine.

Solis: Yes, but as I said, if Latinos are only being considered for Latino plays, then that is very limiting. If the rules would change, and open up, and Latino directors would be considered for any play, then I would feel more relaxed and I wouldn't feel like I have to get a Latino to come direct my play.

Yowell: Another issue that I'm trying to achieve, and it's a struggle, is to develop a closer relationship between academic and professional theatre. I think the work that you and I have been doing over the last several days has been good for both of us, and

especially the students.

Solis: Yes.

Yowell: But, I feel that in academia, we are loading students up with too much specialization in an attempt to prepare them for the professional world.

Solis: I feel that educational theatre is the guardian of the cannon, of Arthur Miller, Ibsen and others. You study these plays and you mount them. But, if you will look at this magazine (American Theatre, which was laying on Yowell's desk), you will see that Miller is not done that much, nor is Tennessee Williams. Professional theatre is looking for the new. The new, meaning not only original works, but writers like Marivaux, for example. His work, Triumph of Love, has been rediscovered and done successfully. But educational theatre has become the guardian of the cannon, as well as a particular style of acting, that is centered in the method.

Yowell: Do you think that we are out of touch?

Solis: No, somebody has got to do it, but you are a little out of touch with the works that are . . .

Yowell: The works that are happening now?

Solis: Yes, I see by the posters that are in your theatre lobby, that you are doing some of those works. I see posters of shows from the early eighties. There is a tremendous shift going on right now, particularly Avant garde works that are having an effect on the way people write plays and the way people act plays.

Yowell: Tell me about acting. There is a debate on going about the method. In Roger Hornby's new book, The End of Acting, he goes after the method, especially emotional recall. He says that we have very few actors in this country who are trained to do the really difficult works, like Shakespeare. How do you feel about the way we teach acting in the university and in the country?

Solis: The method can be very valuable. The method really comes out of psychoanalysis. The idea that everything that we do in our lives is rooted in our childhood. So there are layers of personalities, and it seems like many plays were written for specific actors who are good at showing these layers.

Yowell: But, there are many plays that are wonderful, but they do not require . . .

Solis: Yes, they don't require the method. Whatever work an actor has to do to justify his character, that is actor homework. Often in plays, a character is what he is, and trying to find

psychological reasons for their actions is unnecessary. A character is written as bad, and he is just that, bad. It's not necessary to dig into his childhood to find reasons. What matters is what you are now, not then. There is a lot of writing that is going on now from particular writers like Mac Welman, Len Jenkins, Lori Parks, and Jeffery Jones and their plays do not lend themselves to method acting.

Yowell: Are these folks out of San Francisco?

Solis: No, their out of New York and Chicago. Suzan Lori Parks, for example, is an anomaly. She is a black avant garde writer and her works are extremely difficult. An actor cannot apply the method to her plays, or traditional directing techniques to her work. Her work is different, it reads different. And Erik Ehn, he's in the Bay area, he's from New York. His mission, his life's task, is to write a short play in answer to every Saint in the cannon. So he has plays on St. Michael, St. Agnes, and so on.

Yowell: He's going to be busy.

Solis: Yes, his plays are short works. They can be twenty minutes or ten minutes long.

Yowell: August Wilson is trying to chronicle the whole twentieth century.

Solis: These writers are trying to write plays that require a very different approach to character. They don't think of character as a three dimensional approach to a human being, with motivational causes to characters. But their characters are rooted in performance. The characters are talking to the audience or they break out into song and I do some of that.

Yowell: Sure you do.

Solis: I love a good yarn. I like to tell a good story and that requires good characterization.

Yowell: You also appreciate the power of song, dance and movement and in <u>El Paso Blue</u>, these elements are presented in a very open and free form. These elements are woven into the play in a very natural way, as opposed to a musical, for example. There is movement and song in our lives that you bring into your plays.

Solis: The reason that I'm doing that, that is, stylized movement, dance, song, direct address, and actors moving in each other's space, is because I feel a strong need to break the rigid ideas of stage reality. I feel that stage reality is whatever we want it to be. What I have discovered, is what goes on stage is not real life, so why should it sound like real life. It's a vision, therefore,

I don't care that in real life there is no character who talks like in China in El Paso Blue. In my play, (El Paso Blue), that is the way she talks because that is what is in my head.

Yowell: What would you like to leave with us?

Solis: I think part of being a writer, a theatre artist, any artist for that matter, is connecting with a level of experience that is not available to everybody, and being able to reach in there to make it available to everybody, to communicate. I guess the best way to explain it is to say that we, writers, actors, are Shamans. But it means that we have to break barriers and it requires tremendous risks. When we are up there, it's wonderful, and when we are up there, we have an obligation to find another layer of experience and communicate it as generously as possible to an audience. We must communicate to those who do not have the luxury of that kind of mediation, of that shamanistic level of work. But for the time that we are in rehearsal, to the time that we are on stage, we have to enter that trance to connect with the other world, that will let us in. What I have seen in the professional world is that we hedge a lot, we cheat. I see dishonesty on stage.

Yowell: In professional theatre?

Solis: Yes, if I see it in educational theatre, I can excuse it, because the actor is learning, but in professional theatre you can't lie.

Yowell: Often, we don't know if we are lying.

Solis: Right. We think we are being honest, but it's because we have codified or fossilized our work- - - we become like a priest who is only mouthing words. The Shaman cannot do that. He must live it. My job is to be shamanistic. The actor's job is difficult because he must repeat his performance every night, and he must do it by rote. When he, the actor, comes off stage, he should feel like he has been playing with the Gods. There should be a sense of danger. This is what I want with my actors. I don't mean dangerous like your going to be hurt, but you, the actor are really laying it on the line. The actor must take dramatic risks.

Yowell: Yes, we must take risks.

Solis: Often, after a show or during the intermission, you will hear audience members saying, "Boy, that guy is a good actor". That response, to me, shows that the actor is not doing his job. If the audience sees you acting, then they are not living the emotion.

Yowell: The audience members should identify with the problem, or see themselves or someone they know on stage.

Solis: Right, the audience needs to live the experience. Maybe, the audience should be talking about what the character should or not do. If that is happening, then you have good theatre.

Yowell: Octavio, thanks for being our guest playwright as a part of our Minority New Play Festival.

Solis: Thanks, its been my pleasure.